



## Got Customers?

One of the most frequent struggles for technology companies is finding and focusing on a specific set of customers. Often the reason for this is that the product, service or technology being built can apply to a wide variety of customers. *[For the purposes of this article, we will use the term product to represent products, services, or technologies.]* While this is an excellent position to be in for the long-term, it can be devastating to take this focus at any specific time in the product's life cycle.

The trick to succeeding with technology products is to find a customer set that needs a solution to a specific problem or has a strong desire to fulfill a need that only your product can satisfy. By understanding the needs and desires of a particular customer set, you can target your positioning, advertising, product development and customer service to that group and present your solution as the perfect answer to their needs, problem or desire.

If your product truly applies to a wide variety of customers, then as time goes on and you saturate a specific group or market, you can redirect your focus to a new group and continue to grow your customer base and increase revenues.

### Selecting a Target Market

So how do you go about selecting a target market?

1. *Take stock of your product and identify its strengths and main selling features.*
2. *Brainstorm who can use the product and the ways in which it can be used to solve specific problems.*
3. *Evaluate your product in light of the current and future competition.* Realize that there is always competition, even if it is only from an antiquated technique for addressing the problem. Identify how you will differentiate your product from existing solutions.
4. *Identify segments or customer sets that you anticipate will have the greatest need for your product.* There are many traditional criteria that can be used to segment markets (for example, demographics, psychographics, and industry categories) and there is an unlimited opportunity to creatively define your market segments.
5. *Clearly identify and articulate problems, needs, and/or desires of prospective customers* that will make them take action to purchase your product.
6. *Define how your product provides or will provide the unique solution to specific needs.*
7. *Evaluate the costs of bringing on new customers using various sales strategies.*
8. *Outline the expected buying cycle and identify who are the decision-makers and influencers.* It is most important at this point to paint the picture of the people that will purchase the product and the people who will benefit from the product. You should develop a clear image of who they are, their needs and the influences that affect their willingness to buy.

9. *TALK TO PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS as soon as you have a rough outline of your product and selling strategy.*

By talking with prospective customers, even in the earliest stages of development, you will pick up many ideas, suggestions and insights into what customers will buy and what your competitors are providing. This information is invaluable to shaping the success of your product.

Moreover, you may be able to identify the "low hanging fruit" to pick first. That is, the prospective customers who will most likely buy the product with the least investment on your part.

10. *Refine your vision, product definition, and sales and marketing strategies based on the customer input.* Then, go back and cross check your refinements with additional prospects.

If possible, find a number of enthusiastic prospective customers who are positioned well in their industries as your early customers. Be careful that you do not get into custom product development (unless that is your business), but leverage everything you can learn from having a close working relationship.

### Talking to Customers

Product companies that struggle to generate revenue often loath talking with customers. Either they believe that they have the answers and can define the best solutions, or they fear what customers might tell them.

It is true that sometimes the customer does not know what they want in terms of a solution. But, always they will understand if they have a problem or need that must be addressed. Knowing the need or problem a product solves is critical to its success.

It is surprisingly easy to solicit input from prospective customers. How many people do you know who have a definite need and are looking for a solution that will not investigate a potential resolution? Granted, schedules might be tight and priorities might dictate the timing of the discussion; but if you ask, they will talk with you.

Another issue that comes up is what to discuss. It is best to develop a brief overview of your product and the problems it solves or needs it addresses. In addition, preparing a list of questions will help you identify or confirm specific needs and determine buying preferences. A focused discussion is vital to your success in talking with customers. Armed with a quality list of questions, you will uncover more insights when you talk with prospective customers than you can initially imagine.

Whenever you fear a customer discussion, just remember Nike's slogan...JUST DO IT! When you do, you will reap many rewards that include defining a product that will sell, identifying the hot buttons of the people you will be selling to, and zeroing-in on that "low hanging fruit" that can drive your company's initial revenues. Then, you **will** have **satisfied** customers.